

**Episode 2x07 – Road to Damascus**

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**Air Date:** 12<sup>th</sup> April 2006

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He watched the twin vines of smoke rise from the ground, seemingly lifting the tiny ship up into the cobalt sky. It reminded him of *Jack and the Beanstalk*, only instead of riding the huge growth into the clouds, these vines were taking his father away, leaving him behind like the magic beans pressed into the earth.

*I was seven years old.*

The ship was both clunky and elegant. Her twin thrusters, mounted on either side of a swollen midsection, always reminded him of a grasshopper. Outside of that it was nothing more than a series of sharp-angled boxes welded onto an old Batson 229 frame. It was something thrown together more out of necessity and deep desire to be rid of the ground.

Many years later, he would see a Firefly planted with her cargo doors open, and a pretty girl spinning a parasol and he would remember this scene.

By the time the blossom of dust and debris from the take-off pelted the wooden deck, the ship was nothing more than a blip in the sky. He blinked into sun, unable to shake the same feeling he had months earlier when a balloon slipped from his fingers.

“You’re going to be just fine here,” a voice said from behind him.

The memory started failing here. He remembered turning to face the speaker, but when he tried to resolve his face, it was nothing more than an outline. A fleeting sensory leftover revealing just a big white grin and skin four shades darker than his own.

“What’s your name, son?”

*How could I forget that face?*

“My name?”

“Yes. Your name. Everyone has a name don’t they?”

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“Paulie? Is that you?”

Hodges looked the same: like a walking skeleton. A big jacket weighed on his shoulders like a comforter hung out to dry. His eyes, sullen and dark, were set deep into his skull. His prominent jaw and cheekbones seemed only to prop up the tanned, but loose skin on his face. Thin, pale lips that did not part enough to bare teeth framed his smile.

“Hodges,” Book returned.

“Cold here. Me, I always like to land on the sunny side you know?”

“I know.”

He tried to force a smile and relax. Hodges was just like him. Trained to pick apart the casual glance or a subtle shift of weight the way a scientist would stare down an amoeba from a microscope. He knew what he was going to do from the moment he’d set the beacon in the shuttle, to help Serenity find it if he didn’t return. And he couldn’t let that show.

Hodges took a seat across from Book after giving the crowded bar a final glance.

“This isn’t where I figured we’d be doing this. Hell, wasn’t even sure you’d show. You seemed *not yourself* when we last spoke.”

Book gave Hodges a look, downing the rest of his drink. The brown liquor burned his throat. It had been a long time since he’d had the taste of it in his mouth.

“I like people,” he said motioning for another drink from the bar.

“Sure, *Book*. That’s *exactly* what I remember about you,” Hodges relaxed, kicking a dirty boot up onto the table. “It’s been what now, four, five years?”

“Six. I’m not here to swap Christmas cards, Hodges. I’m not sure you would even know how to do that.”

Hodges finally smiled, his big gums framed a smile quite practiced at causing discomfort. “I heard you went and found religion after Serenity Valley. As a matter of fact, I know a lot of things about you. Now.”

“That so?”

“Sure. I get this call out of the middle of nowhere and it’s my old pal, only we haven’t spoken in a long time. Actually he’s supposed to not even exist any more. Disappeared,

written off the *books*. But there he is, on my screen, and he comes to *me* with the biggest bounty prize in the 'verse. It made me *curious*, to say the least."

"So you looked me up. I would have done the same," Book said, accepting his new drink from the barmaid. "And based on what you found, I am rather surprised you still decided to come alone."

Hodges smiled. "Who says I did that?"

"I do. As a matter of fact, I was counting on it."

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"Paul is it?" the faceless man said to him. "Colonel Carver's son?"

"Yes."

The big grin grew wider still. "He's a good man. He believes very much in what we do here, you know. You wouldn't be here if he didn't." A giant hand grabbed his shoulder and squeezed. "I'm sorry about your mother. Those border worlds can be hostile."

He turned away from the big man, peering into the sun-filled sky. He was alone and felt the tears reaching from deep within his chest. "I'm not supposed to cry."

There was a deep, but friendly laugh behind him, "No, huh? Well, cry if you want to. I won't tell. We're going to be family now. Alliance takes care of its own, and this is a special school, Paul. A very special place. You're going to meet some wonderful people here."

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Hodges shifted in his seat, uncomfortable for the first time. "I guess that's what the years will buy you then, huh? Familiarity. Maybe that's why they ultimately decided to keep us all apart."

"Maybe. Maybe they knew they made a mistake with us."

Hodges ordered a beer and waited for the barmaid to leave. "Only mistake they made was kicking me out and letting you go."

Book sipped his drink, fighting to keep his other hand steady on his thigh. "I didn't give them a choice. And *you* didn't leave them one from what I hear."

Hodges laughed this off. "They came after me for sure, you know. It wasn't like it was easy for me. Not like you."

Book felt something old and mean begin to wake up in him. He could feel the whiskey grow heavy and warm in his stomach.

“You cost them a lot of money and people. That’s not usually something they forgive easily.”

“Heh. Well, we’ve all got our problems. Imaging the looks on their faces if they saw the two of us here. Two *fellows* of the school as it were. There’s more secrets between us at this table then between here and Osiris.”

“Doubt that.” Book could not help the smile. Hodges’s specialty was always his charm. People seemed to want to believe in him even when they knew he was lying, even when he was putting the barrel to their temples.

Hodges accepted his beer, tossing two coins onto the barmaid’s tray: one for the drink and another, thicker one, to keep them coming. He downed half the beer in two big gulps and wiped his mouth with his hand in disgust. “Gorram rim crap. Mostly water-- *hopefully* water, I guess. How you’ve been living on this *go se* out here for all these years, I’ll never know.”

“It’s simple. I like it.”

Hodges leaned forward, slapping a gloved hand on the table, staring Book in the eyes. “Gorramit, Paul, you haven’t done anything but spit back these cute little phrases since I got here. If I had wanted pillow talk, I wouldn’t have shot the last bitch. *Dong ma?*”

Book finished his drink, slowly putting the empty glass on the table, never letting his own stare leave Hodges. “That so?”

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The stink of the place was a mystery given it had supposedly only been here for a few years. Somewhere later in time, Paul would face that smell again in Jayne’s room and recognize it immediately. The place smelled of boys; boys who had been worked hard and put to bed with the sweat still on their brow. Boys who were older than Paul, tanned, strong boys with hair in all the places he didn’t have and deep, angry voices.

It hadn’t taken him very long to come to hate the place. Even now, when the cooler air of night blew through the open windows and the room was silent except for some heavy breathing and the squeak of tired bodies shifting on their beds; even when the days had somehow gotten easier for him, when his muscles didn’t ache as much., when his mind had started to accept their lessons with increasing and alarming ease.

He tried not to think of his father. When he did, he realized that he was starting to lose the image of him in his head. It became blurry and often turned into the face of an

instructor or of Jim, the big man who had met him that day at the landing field. Sometimes it would not even be a face he saw, but rather towers of dust. Even now, two years later, whenever he felt a hot breeze on the back of his neck he had to fight the urge to wish it was his father's ship, returning for him.

He doesn't know why he has a hard time thinking about his mother.

"Paul? You awake?"

"Yeah."

Billy's voice was steady. "That was some weird stuff we learned today, huh?"

"I suppose."

Billy's laugh was short and mocking. "How come you never really say anything, Paulie? You ever think maybe if you weren't so quiet all the time the others wouldn't pick on you so much?"

"I don't care about them."

"Whatever."

"I don't. I'm not going to be here forever."

"Paul you don't get it, do you? You're not going *anywhere*. Your dad is never coming back for you. None of our parents are."

Paul felt the anger fill his lungs. He wanted to jump down from his bunk and smash Billy's face into the floor. He fought the anger and the tears with the techniques they'd been learning.

"Bullshit."

"Suit yourself, *zhuang*. But the teachers are right, you know. We're the only family we got now. I don't mind it much. I don't even miss my parents. They can burn on the rim for all I care. I mean what kind of parents just dump you off and never come back, huh?"

Paul stared into the low metal ceiling, unable to close his eyes. Billy's words were sinking in deeper than he wanted them to and he knew unless he focused they were going to break him down again.

"I don't know," he offered.

"You and your short little answers, Paulie. How are we supposed to be friends if all you ever say is nothing?"

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“I guess some people are never going to change.” Hodges leaned back into his chair.

“I’ve changed in many ways. If I hadn’t, you wouldn’t be breathing right now.”

Hodges laughed the threat away. “Aww hell, Paulie. I guess that would be something to see. So if things change so much, then why are we still here alone? Where’s our posse? No, we haven’t changed a bit.”

“Maybe. But if things don’t change, then why do we fight?”

Hodges finished the rest of his beer, held his hand in the air and snapped his fingers several times. “Ideologies my friend. Economics. *Religion*. Hell, I don’t know, seems like even if we didn’t have these, we’d go and invent some symbol just for the purpose of excluding others and then killing them.”

“Like the Alliance?”

This made Hodges’ smile widen. “I picked my flag, that’s all. I’d have sworn you did, too.”

“I’m not about *flags* any more.”

“Of course not, *Shepherd*.”

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The blow nearly took him off his feet. He had tried to roll with it at the last moment, but the kid was faster than his big frame led him to believe. Paul felt his left eye go numb as it filled with blood. Panic seized him as he rolled away from the big boy’s foot crashing near his head. He spun and twisted his body to come to a squatting position, holding his injured arm against his side to avoid the sickening pain he felt when the bones grinded into each other.

The big boy had already begun his pursuit, and Paul knew he only had a moment to act. He launched himself into the boy’s attack, ducked a quick, panicky swing from him and jabbed with everything he had left into the boy’s groin. It was crude, but effective. The big boy dove head first into the dirt, a cloud of dry dust rising around him as he did.

Paul rolled onto his good arm, forcing himself to his feet. He caught sight of Billy, nursing his own damaged leg off to his right.

“You okay?” he asked Billy.

“Hell, no.”

“You need to stop jumping in my fights.”

“There were *four* of them. I thought I was doing you a favor.”

Paul smiled. “Four? That all? You’ve known me six years now. When can’t I handle four?”

Billy smiled then grimaced. “Don’t make laugh, *zhuang*. I only came up to watch when that little one tried to bring a knife into the mix. What was I supposed to do?”

“Fair enough. You going to make me walk back to the infirmary alone?”

“Nah, I’ll hop with you. Big one’s getting up again, incidentally.”

“I hear him.”

Paul walked over to the big boy and, without pausing to reflect or ask for surrender, kicked hard into the boy’s knee. He heard the sound of ligaments popping as the boy tumbled back down into the dirt.

“Don’t get up again,” he warned him.

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“I think you want back in,” Hodges said, accepting the new beer from a tray held before of him. “I think you’re finally tired of whatever the hell it is you’ve been doing out here, and you want to come back to the family.”

“You can think whatever you want,” Book replied, shifting his weight in the small chair until he could feel his hidden pistol rub against his side.

“Well, why the hell else would you be calling me? You come across the bounty of the century and you don’t just turn her in yourself?”

“It couldn’t be that easy. You know that.”

“I do. I do indeed. Think that’s why you called me. Why I think you want back in. I may be somewhat gray in their books, but you know I still have plenty of contacts.”

“Yes.”

“And you know I want back in the mix more than anything. This scraping by on the edge of nothing might be fine for you, but I can’t stand it. You know this could be my ticket back into their good graces.” Hodges’s face was eager.

Book felt as if someone had punched him in the gut. “I’m thinking that is *exactly* why I called you that night.”

Hodges visibly relaxed into his chair, bringing the second beer up to his lips. “Only one thing I can’t get my head wrapped around here. From what I’ve been able to piece together since that call, you’ve been with this crew for a while now. Why did you wait so long? Were they on to you or something?”

“On to me?” Book echoed, without meaning to. “No, they were never *on* to me. No one has ever been *on* to me.”

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Jim looked at him from across the table. The tablet in his massive hands looked tiny. Its screen tinted his serious face with a blue light. Streaks of white streamed across his skin as the words and pages scrolled on the screen.

“You’ve made it what you choose to make it, Paul. I can do nothing more for you now,” he said.

“I know.”

“You’ve made very few friends here. Of course, that’s not really what we’re trying to do here is it?”

“No, sir.”

Jim put the tablet down, bringing his hands together, his thick fingers entwining like rope. “I think you, more than any of them, understood that.”

“I tried, sir.”

Jim smiled. “Well, those that don’t like you at least respect you.”

“I did my best.”

“Uh huh. What you *did* was kick just about every butt in your class. Between you and um...”

“Billy, sir.”

“Yeah, Billy. Between you two I’m not sure there was anyone you didn’t fight.” Jim smiled, grabbing the tablet again, pointing it at the screen. “These last two years, you’ve come a long way. And apparently I’m not the only one to notice. You’ll be shipping out soon to an Alliance HQ on Osiris. The big game so to speak.”



Paul sat motionless, accepting the news as calmly as he could, trying to hide the mixed emotions beneath the surface. “I hope to do you proud, sir.”

Jim stood up, the full height of his frame still towering over Paul’s. He offered a hand. “You have already done that ten times over, Paul. You’ve been more than just a student to me. I think you know that.”

“I do, sir. I meant I hope that—I feel the same, sir. You’ve been like a father to me,” he said, taking the hand. He felt a distinct comfort in the strong grip, as if it had been the first time he had truly touched anyone.

Paul spent a few more moments getting the details of his departure, feeling strangely awkward in a place he’d seen at least a hundred times since his arrival. They shook hands once more, and Paul turned to leave for what he knew was the last time. He ran his hands along the thick paint on the doorframe and stepped into the hall. The gray and blue tiles felt alien and distant already. He wanted nothing more than to climb into the next shuttle and feel the stars around him.

Still, he paused before his body was through the frame, turning back into Jim’s office. “Do you think he’ll come back? Now that I’m done. Is this what he wanted for me?”

Jim looked up from his desk, began to rise from his chair, and then let himself fall back into it. “Colonel Carver ... I’m sure he’s very proud of you, Paul.”

“I haven’t seen or heard from him since the day I got here. Will he even know?”

“He’ll know.”

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Hodges gulped down the rest of his drink, wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his jacket. “The only blip I got from you that whole time is when you used your ident-card on that Alliance cruiser. I got you on Persephone, and then nothing. I figure that’s when you jumped aboard that Firefly. That was a nice trick by the way.”

“What trick?”

“Slipping the Alliance that card and still having them let you go. I wouldn’t even have tried that.”

“You might have more contacts, but I am not without my own resources.”

“Someone owed you a pretty big favor, then.”

Book waived off the barmaid on her approach. “Something like that.”

“Doesn’t really explain why the captain didn’t toss you overboard though. I mean, you flashed Allied credentials right in front of his face. That doesn’t seem like something he would appreciate.”

“I guess it just worked for him at the time.”

“You must have hated them. Hated the way they fought for no good reason. Just for themselves and no one else. Hated the way they had no plan other than to feed themselves, and die.”

Book could not help but to laugh at this. “Hated them for that? No, that’s what I admire the most. Maybe it’s harder for you to see it because you’ve rejected everything except what the Alliance has fed you. You think the only way to live is the Core way. Have you learned nothing from your time out here? These people don’t fight for *no* reason, they fight for the most important reason: the right to be free. Something you and I should appreciate.”

Hodges lost his smile. “Well now, when we finally get you talking, you seem to say quite a bit don’t you, Paulie?”

“My name is Book now. I suggest you get used to it.”

“You’ll always be Paulie to me.”

“And you’ll always be that ignorant fool, *Billy*.”

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“Gorramit, I am not even going to have this conversation,” Hodges yelled at him. “We were sent here to do this and, by God, we are going to do so.”

Paul pulled him back down to his knees. “And I’m telling you there’s been a mistake. That’s not a military target. That’s just a passenger liner headed for Johnston.”

“I don’t *care*. If it’s a mistake, it’s not going to be *my* mistake.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

Hodges shook off the arm. “With *me*? I’m not the one trying to blow our mission.”

“That’s not our mission. It can’t be.”

“You don’t know that!”

Paul peeked around the crates and canisters, hiding his presence from anyone in the bay. The ship could hardly even be called a shuttle. It was going to struggle taking off with those B78 Harmons, especially the left one. No one had boarded it, except some families with supplies. It was probably headed for one of the border worlds. None of that made sense.

“It doesn’t *feel* right. Why send two of us to come down here and take out this raggedy group? *Two* of us.”

Hodges was losing his cool. “You think I spend my days *questioning orders*? I’m told where to go, and what to do. I don’t need to see the big picture.”

“Bull--you see it just fine. I know you. You have enough sense in you to tell that this isn’t right.”

“I’ll say it again. Every bone in my body could be telling me not to do this and I am still going to do it. *I do not question orders.*”

“You’re an idiot then. You haven’t changed a bit.”

Hodges slammed his fist into the side of Paul’s face. With the weight of the pistol behind it, the impact sent him off balance and he barely caught himself before he hit the cement floor. His eyes were full of stars and he could taste blood in his mouth. He tried to pivot away, but Hodges’s foot pressed against his neck, pinning him to the floor. Paul concentrated. He ran through at least thirty-seven ways to get out of the position, but he also knew Hodges would be ready for all of them.

“You’re damn right, I haven’t changed. Why should I?” He pressed his foot harder onto Paul’s neck. “You know why there’s *two* of us here, smart guy? It’s because they know you *have* changed. I didn’t believe it until just now, though. Ten years should have made you *harder* not weaker.”

Paul fought to get the words out. “So they sent you to be my executioner? Is that supposed to be irony?”

“Shut up. You know how many strings I had to pull to get this assignment? If it had been anyone else, you’d be dead already.”

“I don’t want your pity. If you’re going to pull that trigger, I suggest you do it now, before you start doubting your own loyalty.”

Hodges stared down at him, then brought the gun back to his side. Paul knocked the foot off his neck, getting to his feet.

“This war is coming whether you want to fight it or not,” Hodges said, keeping the gun out of his holster. “I suggest you pick your side and be done with it.”

Paul rose to his full height, putting his hand on his own gun. “This mission isn’t about any war. Those people aren’t anything but settlers. This-is-a-mistake.”

Hodges smiled. “I don’t care. I am going over there and killing every last son of a bitch in there. I’ll do it because I was told to do so.”

“They’re *civilians*!”

“I don’t care if it’s the Queen of Londinum! I’ll put a bullet right through the fat bitch’s head. And so will you.”

Paul gripped the butt of his gun. “And I say I will not. This is *my* mission. We go back, tell him it was a mistake. I’ll take the blame.”

“You walk away from this, and the only thing you’ll be taking back to HQ is your ass, right after I hand it to you.”

“Then we’re going to have a problem here.”

“Seems that way. I tell you what. You kick my ass here and I’ll walk away with you. I’ll back up any story you want. Just make it so it’s not the truth.”

Paul stared at Hodges. He’d known this man nearly twenty years. Sometimes he felt he knew Hodges better than he knew himself. He licked the drying blood off his lips, removing his hand from his gun. He watched Hodges put his own piece back into its holster.

Hodges grimaced at him. “You really want to fight over this?”

“Appears that way. You changed your mind?”

“Christ, Paulie! You’re a soldier. You’re supposed to follow orders, without questioning them. You wanna know why we’re here? Why we’ve been told to target this ship? They’re harboring terrorists – they killed Jim, Paulie. Blew up the school.” He laughed viciously at the other man’s shocked face. “You didn’t know?”

“Jim is dead?”

“Blown to bits. I’ll show you the vid-capture I have in my case, if you don’t believe me.” Hodges spun and ripped the pack at his feet open, reaching for the vid-screen, and punching it on. “This is what they did, Paulie. The men responsible have been tracked back to this ship...god-damned Independent trash.”

Paul ignored him and grabbed the screen. It was easy to make out the blackened ruin of the bunk houses he and Hodges had slept in as children. Charred bodies, still smoking,

lay all over the place. He scanned forward until he recognized Jim's body. It was burnt almost beyond recognition, but there were certain things that were easily recognizable – the bit of red hair, on the left side of the head, that hadn't burned off during the explosion...the large blackened ring hanging from the dead hand.

"What...when did this happen?"

"Three days ago. They haven't told anyone, Paulie. I only know about it because certain...*people*...owed me favors. The men who did this...they're on that ship, Paulie. This is our best chance to get them. Jim always told us we'd build a better world. Let's start by getting rid of the people who killed him."

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"Seem to me," Hodges said, "last time we had a conversation like this it didn't go your way."

"That was a long, long time ago," Book replied.

"Well, you snapped out of it back then. You'll do it again, if you already haven't. I'm guessing when you made that call to me you were maybe starting to see the light."

"I've seen about enough light as I'll ever want to. When I called...when I told you what I had here...I wasn't exactly myself."

"I gathered as much. I saw the look in your eyes. But the thing is, you *did* call. Something was in there trying to get out. I think maybe you know it too."

Book tried to relax. He leaned back in his chair until the soft wood creaked. Not far from here Mal, and the others would be wondering where the hell he was. If they knew any better, they would have taken off already and left him and Hodges behind to argue policy until the morning. He knew they wouldn't though. Mal wasn't about leaving people behind.

"You seem to have me down well," he said calmly.

"Shouldn't I, by now?"

"You didn't tell anyone, did you? This has to be you and me. Anyone else and it's just going to get ugly."

Hodges smiled. "Who would I tell? Anyone else would have killed the both of us by now, and taken her in himself. Two is pushing it from what I read about her abilities, but we should be able to at least get the rest of the crew and get her off. Or *take* the ship and get out of here."

“Yeah. That’s the way I figure it. She keeps her bay door open when she’s picking up passengers. You’ll be someone looking for a ride.”

“Where to?”

“Wherever it is we’re heading. You’re not picky.”

“Never was,” Hodges agreed, easing back into his own chair. “Kind of ironic though, don’t you think? The name of the ship?”

“I don’t believe in irony,” Book answered.

“I hear you, but something was sending you a message. What are the chances she’d be named after your last mission for the Alliance?”

Book forced himself to swallow. “Interesting, isn’t it?”

“It’s like the universe is trying to tell you that you left something unfinished. Getting you back there to make amends.”

Book stood from the table. “We’d better do this. We can talk plans on the way. Not that we’ll need them. The girl is, by far, the worst threat.”

Hodges slapped his knee, rising as well. “Understood. And you’re okay here? I mean it’s more than likely we’re going to have to kill more than one of them.”

“I’ll be fine.”

Hodges smiled. “Whatever it was at Serenity Valley ...well, I knew you’d be back, someday. You always were the best of us.”

“No,” Book said, “I was the worst.”

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The shuttle rocked and protested as they flew over the hilltops at a speed and height that made most of its occupants mouth silent prayers. The wind rushed in from a pair of open doors in the bay, filling their ears with a deafening roar that made speech nearly impossible. It did not prevent the man seated across from Paul from attempting to communicate with him.

“Sorry about the ride!” Sergeant Hurst screamed at him with what must have been a relic from his boot camp days, “but we have to hug the ground or that flak will shred us to pieces.”

Paul nodded, turning his attention to the blur outside the door.

“Colonel Cole, sir?” Hurt’s loud voice continued. “They said you were on Trenton?”

“Yes,” Paul yelled as loud as he could without looking at Hurst.

“Bad as it sounds?”

Paul looked to the man and saw the fear hidden deep in his narrow eyes. He noticed more than a few of the other soldiers and officers were waiting to hear the reply. He knew this was where he was going to sell his story. Fifteen years spent fighting against the enemies of the Alliance, another two infiltrating the Independent’s command structure, and the success of his mission was probably all going to come down to this: lying to a bunch of scared kids in the back of a ratty, old shuttle.

He could already hear the echoes of his argument with Billy Hodges across the years.

“Worse,” he said to Hurst, and then turned to the cabin. “Alliance took it to us pretty bad on Trenton. Bad as I seen anywhere.”

“I heard we made ‘em think about it. Maybe softened them up for the Valley,” Hurst piped in.

“Don’t believe it,” Book scowled. “They kicked our ass and didn’t break a sweat. But that’s okay.”

“Sir?”

Paul pulled himself up by the safety trap next to him, planting his feet against the base of his chair. “Serenity Valley is not Trenton. We’re going to fight these bastards until every last one of them is either dead, or running away. It’s here or nowhere. It’s now or die trying.

“So, if any of you,” he regarded Hurst, “are worried about Trenton or Hangzu or Beau, you might as well throw down your arms now. Hell yes, we got bent over three ways from sideways in a lot of places, but not *here*. *Here* is where the Alliance sees what it means to fight on the Border. *Here* is where we put up the big fence and knock them back to Sihnon.”

The room stayed silent. He hadn’t anticipated cheers or grins or anything. These were a defeated people and they knew it. If Serenity Valley was going to be anything to them, it was going to be their graves, and he was one of the horsemen.

War was starting to make him sick. He just wanted it over. He wanted all the damn Independents to disappear and just accept the Alliance. He’d had his own doubts along the way, but he knew they’d all gone out into the black to find a better place, a better society; living like cattle in the dust wasn’t the way to do it.

The faces in the room turned from him until only Hurst continued to stare back. Paul walked over, lowering his head until it was inches from the Sergeant's face.

"I expect you to lead these men today, Hurst. If Trenton was a problem for you..."

"Sir, no sir!"

"Good. When we get there I want you to secure your gear and your men and then take me to HQ. Until then, I want you to shut up and let me enjoy the view while I can."

Hurst nodded, giving a snappy salute.

Paul returned his own gaze into the blur outside the shuttle.

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It had been ridiculously easy to infiltrate Independent command. They hadn't questioned his papers or his rank when he had been *transferred* to Trenton – they had just been happy to get a new officer to replace at least one of the many who had died. He had trained his men, taken them on missions and made himself invaluable to the commanders. He had been careful to keep his troops as intact as he could and, when a risky mission had fallen into his lap, he had managed to miraculously get the majority of his men out alive. All it had taken was a little coordination with the Alliance. He had looked like a hero – and heroes were in short supply. It wasn't much longer after that he was transferred again – legitimately this time – to Serenity Valley.

Headquarters was a hole in the ground, shielded by twin layers of what Paul could now tell was some elaborate stealth web. As soon as he entered the building his radio and links stopped working. The lights in the place were all driven by some elaborate, but primitive, gas system. The grey tubes clung to the walls like vines.

They had entered the place by following a series of winding tunnels starting about three and half miles back. He had recorded coordinates by performing calculations in his head the entire length of the journey. It was something he'd been taught in school many years ago. Even through the many checkpoints and turns he was sure he had his location pinned down to within a few yards. A few yards was as close as he'd ever need to be.

The air in the underground headquarters was stale and thick with the scent of too many people and not enough ventilation. Here and there he'd see round vents drilled into the walls from which brought a small breeze and the far off cries of war. He realized they had created a blackout effect by not bringing in any electrical equipment, relying solely on mechanical devices. He was sure there was some communication device somewhere, but it explained why the Alliance could never find the Independent's headquarters.



Hurst, who had calmed somewhat after landing, had remained nearly silent on the trip but now, passing into the security of the building, seemed to relax.

“You’ll have noticed none of your chip or crystal driven stuff is working right now,” Hurst said without turning.

“I noticed. I expected as much.”

“If any of it’s pre-eighty-nine there’s a good chance you can just throw it away.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

They went through another series of security gates. The wear on the walls and the doors suggested an age that he found hard to believe. It was as though they had been digging here since the beginning of the war. As though this place had been created from the very beginning to be their last stand.

What did they hope to achieve by all of this wasted effort? Paul found himself despising them more than ever. What could have been accomplished by now if all this time and effort had been put into making better worlds? Better places to live instead of fighting over patches of ground just barely able to sustain life? It did not make sense.

He figured it would never make sense.

They finally entered into a hollow dome. A single metal rod about 1.5 feet thick ran from the floor into the ceiling and, Paul imagined, well on up until it came out topside, either hidden or disguised in such a way the Alliance would likely never find it.

“This is just the receiver of course,” a tall, thin man said approaching him. “If we transmitted from here, we’d be shelled instantly.”

Paul took note of the rank and saluted properly. “Colonel Hammond Cole reporting as ordered, sir.”

“Of course,” he said, not returning the salute. “I’m General Han. The rest you’ll get to know shortly. I am sure you are wondering why we called you up the way we did. Trenton was a hell pit. Any man would deserve a rest after something like that.”

“Sir, if may,” Book offered, “I don’t see much point in resting now.”

This made only the remotest corners of the general’s mouth turn upward. “No. There won’t be much rest for us now. We’re running low on experienced officers and your record suggests you’d be perfect for what we need you to do here.”

General Han finally returned Paul's salute, and took a large scroll of paper from another man nearby, rolling it out on a wooden table in front of them. He motioned for Paul to come to him, which Paul promptly did.

"We've lost this war, Colonel. Lost it a long time ago. The end is coming for sure. I don't expect to be here to see it. Neither should you."

Paul stared at the map. He noticed a least a thousand tiny red dots along a perimeter, encircling a topographical print out of the Valley.

"But," the general continued, "We're going to make them pay a hell of a price for taking us out. I've lined the entire valley with explosives. We're going to lure the Alliance ground troops into the valley and then we're going to bury them all under 10,000 tons of debris."

He looked proudly down at the map. Han was the secondary target here. A master strategist. A cold and calculating killer of Alliance troops. "The whole system will remember the battle of Serenity Valley."

"And your own men?" He felt the disgust rise in his throat at the thought of the Independents and Alliance soldiers that would die if this ploy worked. "Is this why you brought me here? To lead a bunch of your own guys into that valley as decoys?"

The general put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. "What you did at Trenton...how you managed to save all those men from being killed. You led them from a slaughter through Alliance lines and got them off the scene. We're going to need some of that now. I wouldn't have called you up if I didn't think you weren't the man for the job, Cole."

"I think you're insane. How could you think I was the kind of man that would risk everything to save one group of men only to lead another on a suicide mission?"

"Now, son, you need to calm down--"

"Don't you fucking *son* me."

He could feel the tension rise in the room. He could feel his own emotions boiling to the surface and he wasn't sure why. He could hear Hodges laughing at him from across the years. He heard Jim's voice in his mind. Calm and confident. Hard to believe he was now a burned chunk of bone in a shallow grave.

He should hate these people – he did hate these people. Not the soldiers, not the everyday grunts that did what they were told because they thought they were fighting for a cause – but he hated the leaders; the generals and commanders who must have known, from the outset of the war, that they could never win. They must have known, yet they'd gone to war anyway and millions had been killed because of them.

This was all such a waste.

“This is an order, Captain Cole. You will take your men and lead them into the Valley and there you will engage the enemy and lead them to their demise.”

“No.”

The general took a deep breath, “I am not asking you to die. I am asking you to take those men in and do everything—everything we *know* you can do to get them out again. Cole, what you have to ask yourself here is this: What do you believe in?”

“This war is over, General. I’m not going to let it end with the senseless slaughter of thousands of men. Alliance or Independent.”

“You’ll do it, Captain, and you’ll do it right now. You’ll do it, or by God’s own will, you will not leave this room alive.”

He looked from the general to the map, before sliding his gaze around the room, noting the other men in it and their positions. The general was wearing a sidearm, nothing fancy, standard issue. Maybe thirty or thirty-five shots. He thought about Hodges and Jim. About the school. About the thousands of men on either side of this battle who were going to die for no reason other than to give a name to a remote patch of nothing on a nowhere world.

This was going to be it for him. One more run and then he was done. He would send the signal, he would complete his mission. He would end this war by saving thousands at the expense of hundreds. It was not a choice men should ever have to make. It was something *gods* did on the backs of paper books.

He made one more cursory glance to the people in the room, took a deep breath...

...and killed them all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alarms were blaring in his ears when he reached what he hoped was the last tunnel. He didn’t know if the general had already given the order to blow the explosive or if that was a command decision based on field observations. If he’d done it right, followed procedure, the general more than likely had planned for his own demise. The order to destroy the valley was going to come from someone else.

He raced through the corridors, dispatching men where he needed to, avoiding others when he could. Despite years of training, his heart was racing. Sweat poured down his brow as he pushed his legs harder. He plunged through a dark opening and slammed into a ladder leading to the surface. His shoulder and arm screamed with the sudden jolting

pain. He felt the left side of his head throb and tasted blood in his mouth. Fighting all of it he pulled himself up the ladder and threw open the hatch.

The cool night air greeted him, burned his throat as he rested against a rock and took deep breaths. He looked up into a full canopy of stars wondering if he could see the Alliance fleet from here. In the valley thunder and lightning as two armies collided.

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out what would appear to be a flask to anyone who didn't know better. A twist here, a pulled lever there and the opened sideways in his hands, the small keypad blinking as it activated. He punched in the coordinates from memory and sent the signal. A light appeared on the transmitter. Green for received.

Somewhere in the shiny black a group of ships was making their descent.

Looking across the valley he tapped another message into the transmitter, more than just a set of coordinates this time. He didn't know if the message had been received and understood, but he had done his best. Circumstances were beyond him now. He stared at the pad a moment longer, before tossing the device into the night.

He laughed for no reason and looked once more across the valley to the sharp, shadowed edges of the hilltops. It would all be burning soon. Instinct told him to run but he did not move. The war would be over very soon. They would not need men like him anymore.

He heard the footsteps coming up the ladder. He thought a moment about defending himself, felt the training want to kick into gear and fight to the very end. Hodges would have loved that scene. Paulie against the might of the Independent's army, all flowing from the tiny tunnel opening to bring him down. The valley on fire around them. It would have been a good death.

Instead he sat there and took the blow. His head slammed into the ground. The world was swimming in his ears.

"Goddamn, traitor son-of-a-bitch," Sergeant Hurst screamed at him as he placed a heavy knee against his back, "I should just kill you now."

His arms were twisted behind him. His injured shoulder shot a massive electrical jolt down his spine. He lay where he fell. Hurst was kicking him in his side. He felt at least two ribs give and then break. The other man was a shadow against the stars. Behind him, the sky filled with light and the stars began to spill their fire into the valley.

He saw trails of smoke from the missiles glowing in the light of their own engines. He heard the high whine of bombs plummeting to the ground. This was what he'd come for – to end the war. He wondered briefly, as the world exploded and went black, if his father would come for him now.

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“Can you hear me? Hey, can you hear me?” The voice broke through the darkness. With some effort, he opened his eyes, blinking stupidly up at the man leaning over him. He could tell, from the awkward angle of his arms, at least one of them was broken. He vaguely registered the thought that he should be more panicked and pained than he was at the fact he couldn’t feel them, but he was too shocked.

“Wha...”

“Shh, don’t talk. You’re lucky to be alive.”

He felt a gentle hand against his forehead. “I’m...my arms...”

“I know. It’s all right. One is definitely broken. I’ll find a first-aid box; splint it as best I can until they come to take us to—to wherever--interment camps, I guess. I’ll take care of you.”

“Are you.... Who are you?”

There was a gentle hand against his forehead again.

“I’m Shepherd Derrial Book, HQ Chaplain. Please, just rest now. Just rest.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It had been six days since the bombing of Serenity Valley. He knew this only because Shepherd Book told him. The younger man had somehow managed to splint his right arm, procuring a tight immobilizer and splint for it. He wasn’t sure he had managed to reset the bones properly, but he had done the best he could.

“I’m not a doctor,” the Shepherd had apologized after he had applied the splint. “I’ve done the best I could, but I’m pretty sure you’re going to need to have it properly fixed when someone finally comes to get us. Otherwise, you won’t be able to use it properly again, I don’t think.”

He watched the younger man as he worked over some of the other survivors he had managed to gather in the caves, where they were taking refuge. There weren’t many, and with every passing day, there were less, as men died. The Shepherd never faltered in his care or his optimism, however. He rationed out the water and what little food had been found, along with his compassion and gentle words. And when another man died of his injuries, the Shepherd would say a prayer over him and promise to let his family know.

Late on the seventh night, after the Shepherd had checked the wrappings on his arm and helped him drink some water, he had rested beside him. “I wish everyone else was doing as well as you, Colonel.”

“I’m not...I’m lucky, I guess. How many are left?”

“Here? We’re down to about six, but honestly – I don’t expect two of them to last much longer. Their injuries...well, the infection is just too much. Perhaps...if I had proper supplies, or if someone came... It’s a shame.”

“When...where are they?”

The Shepherd laughed mirthlessly. “I don’t know. But they have to come soon, right? They wouldn’t leave so many people here to just die, would they?”

“No, they wouldn’t. They won’t. They’ll come soon and...”

“Camps. They’ll put us in camps. But at least we’ll be out of *here*. And they’ll fix you up properly. They’ll take care of you.”

He fought the panic that rose inside him when Shepherd Book singled him out, shaking his head. “Not just me...all of us. There will be doctors at the camps for all of us.”

“But you won’t be going to the camps.”

“Why...”

“I know who you are.” The Shepherds’ calm words hit him like bricks. He blinked and tried to sit up, before falling back.

“I’m Colonel Cole.”

“For now. Here. Until they take you back and give you another identity. Don’t worry, no one else knows. They’d kill you – or try to, anyway. I won’t tell anyone.”

“How...why are you helping me?”

“I’m a Shepherd. I take my vows seriously – ‘*thou shalt not kill.*’ I wouldn’t be much of a Shepherd if I just left you to die, would I?”

“But if you knew...you could have just left me. You don’t have to help me.”

“You’re wrong. ‘*Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, you do unto me.*’ It’s my job to minister, not judge. I might not agree with the side you chose, but you must have had your reasons for it. Besides, the war is over--we’re not soldiers or enemies any more. We’re just men. Just men trying to make it through another day.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Fifteen days after Serenity Valley had been bombed, with Shepherd Book's help, he had managed to hobble weakly to the mouth of the cave. The stench underground – from the stale air and the decomposing bodies – had become almost too much to bear. He should have realized it would be worse topside. Everyone was dying, and it didn't matter what side they had been on. Bodies left to rot in the sun...everywhere he looked he saw only death. And still, no one came for them.

He and Shepherd Book were fairly stationary, but it was impossible to mistake the moans of the dying for anything other than what they were. Every morning, the cries for help were fewer.

He wondered if the whole valley was this way – bodies of soldiers rotting were they had fallen; survivors waiting for rescue. Even a prison camp would be better than this – at least they would be given rations.

He had always known the Alliance would win this war. They were too strong, too organized, not to. He had fought hard for them, for the 'verse they were trying to create. He had been taught from an early age that all the Alliance wanted was peace and cooperation among all the planets. They wanted to build perfect worlds, where everyone had access to a solid education, good medical care...freedom from crime. He had believed in that vision.

But this – what were they trying to prove here, at Serenity Valley? They had won -- what did it serve leaving so many soldiers, from both sides, to die? Even if they couldn't evacuate or contain anyone right now, they could still send in doctors and medical supplies to save who they could. There was no reason for them not to drop ration packs or water.

He had survived, against the odds on what had amounted to a suicide mission. They had told him he would save thousands of lives; but he had cost them. Each day the Alliance didn't come, he was responsible for the deaths of more people. The weight of this knowledge sat heavy on him.

Hodges had often told him his biggest problem was that he thought too much; he didn't just follow orders. Why should he care how many died, if the objective was achieved? They were trying to help the rim planets, yet everywhere they turned they were met with resistance – why shouldn't the Alliance end that resistance any way they saw fit, to better the 'verse?

But now – the war was over. Shepherd Book had said it best – they weren't soldiers anymore, they were men...men just trying to survive.

They sat, backs against a partial wall. Both men tied strips of material over their mouths and noses to help filter the smells, but it didn't seem to help much.

The Shepherd's face was gaunt from hunger, his lips cracked and scabbed over from thirst. They had been rationing their water for a while now, a mouthful or two a day – but there was hardly any left. He tried not to think about how thirsty he was. He tried not to notice the yellow seeping into the younger man's eyes, the sallowness of his skin, the way he barely moved; barely breathed. He reached out and gripped the other man's arm, willing him to stay alive.

"They'll come. They'll be here soon. They have to. They won't just leave everyone here to die. They'll come."

Book opened his eyes and looked at him, shaking his head weakly. "They're not coming back for anyone. They don't care enough for anyone here. They'd rather it all be forgotten."

"Maybe...maybe some of you. But they won't abandon me."

"They have, though." The Shepherd coughed dryly. "We'll die here together."

"We're not going to die."

"Where are you from?" The Shepherd asked. The sudden turn in the discussion made him sigh. He closed his eyes and rested his head against the wall behind him.

"Nowhere. I don't have a home – never did. I don't even have a real name. Where are you from?"

"I'm from Lilac, but lived for five years at an Abbey on the outskirts of Persephone City. It's where I was ordained. I miss it. You'd like it there – it's beautiful." The expression on his face turned wistful. "There's a big garden in the back. We grow fresh vegetables and fruits and sell them at market. In the spring, the apple orchard out back blooms. The blossoms are white and pink and smell...well, not like this." He shook his head depreciatingly. "Father Leung told me I would always have a home there. I wonder if I'll ever get back."

"You will. They'll come. They'll be here soon. I have...I have a marker, in my arm. As long as I'm still alive, it will lead them to me." He tried to keep the doubt from his voice. "I promise, I'll get you out of here. I'll take you home. They'll come for me."

Book didn't respond to that. Instead, he reached into his pocket for his bible. It was old, the pages worn and creased. The leather binding was shiny in spots, where hands had caressed it and rubbed it in prayer. The Shepherd handed it to him. "Read to me. We'll find our salvation here."



“But...”

“Please. I’m so tired, I can’t do it myself. We’re here, together. Whether the Alliance comes or not – I don’t want to argue it. Only my God is faithful. Only He won’t abandon me. Please...Cole...read to me.”

The book felt warm in his hands. He moved closer to the younger man, cleared his throat. “My name – my real name – is Paul.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Shepherd? Shepherd Book? Please...you need to hold on.”

They had run out of water three days ago, and were dying of thirst. His throat was so parched, it hurt to speak. The Shepherd was in even worse shape. His lips were cracked and his eyes sunk deep into their sockets. When he squeezed the flesh on the younger man’s arms, the skin remained indented.

“I’m going to go and find some water again, okay? I’ll – there has to be water.”

“No water,” the Shepherd rasped weakly. “Looked already, when we first came out, and again. Don’t--conserve your strength.”

“I don’t understand...why....You shouldn’t be this dehydrated. I need to find you something to drink, or you’re going to die”

The younger man nodded weakly. “Had to save...have I saved you?”

He blinked against the pain the younger man’s question caused in his chest; his heart ached. “You saved me. You saved my life.”

“Not what I meant,” the younger man whispered. “I want to know...have I saved *you*?”

“Shepherd...”

“I have drunk from the well of life; I’m ready. Tell Father Leung...promise me. Go to the Abbey and find your way.”

“We’ll go together. Just hold on – they’ll come for us. Soon. Soon.”

They were silent for a few moments. He smoothed the lank hair away from the Shepherd’s face, noting how cold his skin was despite the heat. “Tell me about the Abbey again.”

The younger man opened his eyes, but they remained hazy and unfocused. “It’s beautiful,” he whispered. “Beautiful. The garden will be planted now, the trees

blooming. Can you hear the bees buzzing? Father Leung likes to sit under the oak tree and drink hot tea. Someone's singing...Paul?"

"I'm here."

"Paul? Paul?"

"I'm here, I'm with you, I'm here..." He kept repeating that, long after the Shepherd stopped murmuring his name, long after his eyes had closed, long after he had died.

\* \* \* \* \*

"*Tian xiao de*, he's finally waking up."

The voice, half-amused and half-mocking, made him wince. Even through his eyelids, he could see the brightness of the electric light hanging above him. When he opened his eyes and actually looked around, he thought he'd go blind from it. The sheet pulled over him felt clean and cool. He recognized the thrum of engines and realized he was on a large ship. "Hodges?"

"Paulie," the other man grinned. "Looks like I saved your ass again."

"What happened?"

"Thought you were dead. Some idiot on the Confederate didn't realize the pinging on his screen was your marker. He just assumed you'd been killed in the bombing."

"How..."

"I asked them to double check. Told them you were too much of a bastard to die. What's that old saying – about cockroaches?"

"Why are you here?"

"Came in to help interrogate some of the PoWs. When we realized you were possibly still alive, I went down with them. You were in bad shape, I have to tell you. Doctors have fixed your arm and pumped you full of fluids again, but you've lost about thirty pounds."

"My stuff..."

"I got it all. You were delirious when I found you, you know, but you made it clear what you wanted."

"Shepherd's Bible..."

“Got it, and the cross and his clothes. Couldn’t get the body. Not enough room on the transport.”

“He saved me.”

Hodges shrugged. “Bleeding heart, then. I saved you. And I have to tell you, a thank you would be nice. Perhaps we could even do a job together...”

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “Not for me,” he replied. “I’m done, Hodges. I want out.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“You said you’d read stuff about her. What did you find out?” They were outside the bar now, walking through the back alleys towards the docks.

Hodges smirked. “Not much. She’s dangerous, I know that much. And they want her back badly. I’ve got a file number, not that it helps. 1122-TAM. Didn’t want to press too much; didn’t want to raise any flags. Not that it matters.”

“Smart move. They’re probably watching her files anyway, to see if they can flag her down. Her brother is trying to figure out what they did to her.”

“He’s a smart one too,” Hodges agreed. “Easier to get information on him, and his family. The parents are prominent doctors themselves, back on Osiris. She’s a geneticist, he’s an obstetrician.”

“You know more than me. Simon doesn’t talk about them.”

“Can you blame him?” Hodges laughed meanly. “They sold him out, but not before they sold the daughter first. Kind of like what our fathers did to us.”

“What do you mean?”

“The parents – they knew where she was going. They enrolled her in the program.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The Abbey sat back from the road, its winding spires barely visible above the trees surrounding it. With a sigh, he walked through the gates towards the massive wooden doors.

The yards were quiet. Behind the Abbey, he could make out the small apple orchard Shepherd Book had told him about. The trees were bare now, as the season headed into winter. He wondered what they would look like in the springtime.

Shifting the bag he carried carefully, he reached the doors, staring at the massive knocker willing himself to lift it. He was here for a legitimate reason – an important one. The Shepherd's vestments and Bible should be returned to the place he had called home; his friends here deserved to know what had happened to him. It was the least he could do.

"Are you going to knock or just stand there and admire the woodwork?" The voice, speaking behind him and to his left, made him jump and strike out. He managed to stop himself from hitting the older man who had spoken to him, but only just.

"I'm ... sorry. You startled me."

"I suppose I did," the older man agreed. "I apologize. I'm Father Leung, the Prior of this Abbey. Can I help you?"

He felt awkward and unprepared for this encounter, even though he was here of his own free will. He hadn't thought this through to a logical conclusion – instead, he had acted solely on impulse, something he hadn't done since he was a child. Instead of responding to Father Leung, he stared at the man blankly. Years of Alliance training and it all boiled down to this: he was broken.

"Son, can I help you?" The older man was looking at him with concern now. "You look like you need a friend, or at the very least a hot cup of tea and a sandwich. Come with me – we can talk after you've eaten something."

\* \* \* \* \*

Father Leung stroked the Bible he had been given. "He was a good man. Joined us here at the Abbey when he was thirteen, after his parents were killed."

"How did they die?"

"Alliance arrested them for dusting their crops with fertilizer not approved for his region. They were sentenced to the labor camp out at Duluth -- mining. His father died in a cave-in within the year. His mother died not long after, but he never found out the cause. He was angry, of course. Vowed he would get even. I knew when the war started that he'd go to join the Browncoats. I didn't think he'd join as a Chaplain though." Father Leung sighed. "What did you say your name was again?"

"I didn't." He looked at the teacup in his hand. "I don't know who I am anymore. Who I'm supposed to be."

"I imagine that's a common feeling for a lot of the men returning from the war – you can't help but wonder if you're the same man that went to fight. It's natural. I'm sure the changes are only superficial though – you're still the same man."

“I hope not. I don’t think I want to be.” He looked at Father Leung. “Can a man change, if he really wants to?”

“If he really wants to,” the older man agreed. “Is that why you’re here? To change your life?”

It was impossible to talk through the pounding in his chest and the sudden tears clogging his throat, so he nodded instead. Father Leung reached out and gingerly removed the teacup from his shaking hands. “Are you staying?”

“He saved my life. And I killed him.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Should I tell them I’m an old friend of yours, or what’s the plan here, Paulie?”

Hodges was a few feet in front of him. The alley had narrowed considerably. Out of the corner of his eye, Book saw a rat sitting on a pile of garbage. “The plan?” He drew his gun and pointed it at the man in front of him. “The plan is to kill you and keep River safe.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The earth was loamy and rich between his fingers, the heat of the midday sun warm on his back. Now that spring had finally arrived, he found himself spending most of his time in the gardens, weeding and planting and tending the new green shoots springing from the fertile earth. The apple trees were laden with fragrant blossoms of pink and white. It was like a new world to him.

The lunch bell had chimed at least an hour ago, but he had not risen to join the rest of his brethren. Instead, he had stayed behind continuing to mix the earth, making straight rows of freshly planted seeds in a newly turned plot.

“You didn’t come in for your meal.” It was Father Leung. “You must remember that the body needs nourishment, just as the soul does, Saul.”

Saul was what they called him, and there were nights when it made him weep. Had he been named Paul, in the beginning, just so he could experience the humiliation of that backward slide? Had he been made for an apostle and turned to bad purposes? Or was it just another lie that was grafted onto him, one that didn't go beneath skin, couldn't ever penetrate?

“I wanted to get this finished for Brother Marcus. His hands and knees have been bothering him.”

Father Leung nodded at this. “It is a kindness, indeed, to take the work of others and spare them their suffering. Marcus is not as young as he once was. I brought you a cold glass of milk and a ham sandwich. Take a break for a moment and talk to me.”

“Yes, Father.” Brushing his hands across his homespun pants, he leaned back on his heels and smiled gratefully at the frail man. “I am thirsty. You should have called me though, instead of coming out all this way.”

“The walk was good for me, Saul. I’m not so old yet, I hope. What are you planting?”

“Corn. I think it will work well here. The soil should be rich -- Brother Marcus tells me this quarter has lain fallow the last few years.”

Father Leung nodded. “It was harder to plant the entire garden with so many gone to serve during the war. Brother Derrial, in particular, was missed. He loved working in the garden as much as you seem to.”

Saul nodded absently, his expression suddenly far away. “He told me about this garden. About the apple trees and the strawberry bushes, the tomato plants. He said this was the most peaceful place on earth. He loved planting things, making them grow.”

“It’s why he went away,” Leung agreed. “He wanted to plant ideas instead of carrots. I’m glad to see his words fell on fertile ground in you.”

“I’m not sure they did,” Saul demurred, turning back to the dirt. “I don’t deserve to be here instead of him.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because...he was a good man.”

“He was. Would he still have been a good man if he’d let you die, as you still seem to think he should have?”

“He would have been justified in not helping me. He didn’t have to save me.”

“He did though – that’s what he was there for. The Bible says to love your enemies.”

“It also says an eye for an eye. If our positions had been reversed, I wouldn’t have saved him.

“Maybe, maybe not. It’s beside the point anyway, because you’re here. Would you want to dishonor his memory – his sacrifice – by denying you deserved it? In the eyes of God, all men are equal. All men are worthy.” Father Leung sighed, dropping gingerly to his knees beside the younger man. “Show me what you have learned, son. Teach me how to garden.”

“Yes, Father,” Saul replied meekly, putting his glass and half-eaten sandwich aside. “Perhaps in showing you, I will learn myself.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Saul enjoyed the change of seasons and the peace of the Abbey. Before he had come, he hadn’t stayed in one spot for more than three months his entire adult life. It was hard to believe he’d been here almost six years now.

Father Leung had become old and frail, his muscles weak from a palsy of some sort that made him shake, his eyes dull with age. He was sitting under one of the apple trees, a blanket draped over his legs as he watched the men prepare the garden for a new season of planting.

Saul approached him with a hot cup of tea, nodding his head as he handed the delicate china vessel to him. “You’re not too cold sitting here are you, Father? Brother Tuck told you not to get chilled, remember?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” The older man waved a hand in his direction, taking an appreciative sip of tea. “I was just thinking about rebirth. Rebirth and you, Saul.”

“Me?” Saul smiled slightly at that. “Why me?”

“I was thinking you need a new name. You’ve been Saul too long – you’re not the man you were when you came to us so many years ago.” Leung smiled ruefully at the other man’s surprised face. “You don’t agree?”

“I’m not...I’m happy with the name you gave me when I first arrived. Have I given you reason to believe I wasn’t?”

“Saul is a name for a man who has offended God. Perhaps you were that man when you first arrived. You aren’t that man anymore.” Leung looked out over the garden again. “You’ve been reborn here; physically and spiritually. Physically, nearly every cell of your body has regenerated since you’ve been with us – that man no longer exists. Spiritually, I believe you’re new as well. You no longer need to serve here as penance. Brother Derrial wouldn’t have expected it.”

Saul looked down at his hands, which were clasped tightly in his lap. “I haven’t viewed my time here as penance. I... Father Leung, when I came here...I was lost. I was bereft of knowledge, of friendship...of home. I had no family, and I had done...I had killed and said I was doing it to make the world a better place, even believed it, when in actuality I wasn’t. I’ve found a purpose here; one truer than the purpose I once served. I agree that I am no longer the man I was, but I am still learning who I am and what my place is in this world. The Abbey is my home, my refuge. Do you *want* me to leave?”

“I want you to stay,” Father Leung replied honestly. “I want to enjoy your company for years to come. I want to continue our discussions about theology and literature. But mostly, I want to know you are here because this is where you belong. I think you need to embrace the man you are now and walk the world a bit – see what’s changed; see if God brings you back to us or sends you somewhere new. But first, I think you need a new name.”

Saul bowed his head as Father Leung spoke, his forehead almost touching the older man’s knee. “I will take a new name, if that’s what you want, but I do not wish to leave.”

“Think on it. We will never force you out, but I believe you need to leave to prove to yourself that you have changed. When I look at you, I still see the doubt in your eyes – not doubt of God, but a lack of faith in yourself. Until you can believe you are free of past sins, you will never truly be free. You need to make your peace with the universe and then – if you still want to – you can return to us. You will always have a home here.”

Saul blinked back the sudden heat in his eyes. “What will I do?”

“You’ve been training long enough, studying with us. Let me ordain you, and then go -- minister to others. See what’s changed and what hasn’t. Let God lead you where He will – He has plans for you. Put your faith in Him and He will show you where you’re needed.” Father Leung patted his head. “So, my son, what shall we call you as you prepare to embark on this new adventure? Shall we call you Paul, and make your transformation complete?”

“Not Paul.”

Leung nodded. “As you wish. Not Paul. Perhaps...you have been a friend and brother to us, much like the man you honored by coming here. Shall you be a Shepherd? Shepherd Derrial Book?”

On his knees in front of Father Leung, Saul’s eyes filled with tears. “Yes, I think that is the best name for you. He’s alive in you still. You honor him with every breath. Shepherd Book. Join me for dinner tonight and we shall discuss your plans for your sabbatical. I am pretty sure I have just the vestments you will need.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Hodges stiffened slightly, before turning slowly to look at him. The grin on his face belied the anger flaring in his eyes. “A gun, Paulie? Whatever happened to settling our differences with our fists?”

“Can’t take the chance,” Book replied steadily. “I haven’t been training and I know you probably never stopped. This is the only way I can beat you.”



“At least you admit it,” Hodges replied. “Not that it matters. You’re not going to kill me.”

“I am if it’s the only way to fix this. I should never have called you – wouldn’t have, if I’d been in my right mind.”

Hodges laughed at that. “I think you were in your right mind, and that’s why you called. This isn’t you, Paulie. You’re not a Shepherd. You’re an Alliance Operative, born and trained. Doesn’t matter how long you’ve been away, that’s who you are.”

“Not anymore.”

“Always. Besides, you won’t shoot me. We’re family, Paulie. I’m the only family you got.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Book hadn’t left the Abbey until late spring, after Father Leung passed. He liked to think he hadn’t left because of the older man’s ill health, but he knew he hadn’t left because he was scared. He liked the man he was now – liked being the new Shepherd Book. He enjoyed the easy acceptance of his brethren, the steady day-to-day work in the Abbey garden. If, sometimes, he thought it was monotonous, he realized it was a small price to pay to be away from the intrigue and death and harsh living that had characterized the majority of his life.

Now, as he wandered through the streaming masses at Persephone docks, he wondered why he had left. Despite the fact Father Leung had thought he needed to walk the world a bit, to see what God’s plan was for him, he hadn’t been forced to leave. So, why was he here?

Was it because of the nightmares that still haunted him – of the real Book dying so that he could live? In his dreams, he could still smell the overly ripe and rancid stench of bodies, both Alliance and Independent, left to rot in the valley. He could still hear the dying moans of men and women, abandoned by the cause they had fought so hard for.

The Alliance had told him they were building a better world and he had believed them. He’d *helped* them, despite the fact that he had known – some part of him had known – that he was simply a tool and that they were lying to him.

That was the real reason he had left the Abbey. They had forgiven him too easily for all the horrible things he had done. If they were to be believed, God had forgiven him as well.

So, why couldn’t he forgive himself?

He stopped when he saw the Firefly transport. Sorriest piece of *go se* he had ever seen. It looked like it was held together by nothing except spit and luck. But...

*Serenity.*

The name painted on the hull was emblazoned in his heart as well, tattooed across his soul. Serenity was the reason he was Shepherd Book now; Serenity was the reason he had left the Abbey. Serenity was what he was searching for – and what he was running from.

Bartering his vegetables and strawberries to the cheerful girl twirling the parasol in her hands was small price to pay for a passenger berth.

\* \* \* \* \*

The minute the girl—River--had lurched into her brother's arms, screaming and cold and naked from the cryo-tank--he knew the Alliance was involved. His mind had snapped to attention; had recognized the adrenaline rushing through his body for what it was--years of training, long suppressed, coming to a head.

The Alliance had done something to this girl--something bad, from the looks of things. She was more than half-crazed, but he recognized her easy panther grace and *knew*. There had been rumors, of course--rumors that the Alliance was training women in all the arts--training them to be deadly weapons. He had heard through the grapevine prior to Serenity Valley that the program had been shut down and everyone involved in it extinguished. Obviously, the rumors had been wrong.

His mind was ablaze in wonder. He wondered what he could do to help her. He wondered what he could do to keep Captain Reynolds from killing Dobson, the Alliance mole that was currently being held prisoner. There could be no killing. He didn't hold with that any more, had learned a better way.

\* \* \* \* \*

Book didn't understand Malcolm Reynolds, that was clear from the start. He wondered--often--if the man even understood himself. Despite Mal's professed hatred of the Alliance, he had turned to them when Book had been shot. The Captain hadn't batted an eye when a lowly Shepherd's identity card had guaranteed him first-rate surgeons and fawning respect for all the crew while they waited for his release. Mal hadn't even questioned him about it, although Book was sure there would be a time and a place where he would have to make some accounting for it.

The Captain was an enigma: a Browncoat, a heathen, a thief but honorable, protective, and loyal. Book recognized serenity in him, and that was enough. Mal had a strange way of binding people to him, an easy charm that belied the rage Book often saw in his eyes. He wondered if that same rage had been in himself when he had first gone to the Abbey.

On reflection, of course it must have been. Perhaps it still was. Perhaps it was why he felt such a strong connection to the younger man. He knew Mal would kill him if he ever found out who Book had been. He even wondered sometimes if the captain suspected; if that was why he hadn't pushed Book on revealing too much; hadn't forced him to tell his secrets. Perhaps he didn't really *want* to know.

In his quarters at night, Book read his Bible and asked himself what his purpose was. Why had he been brought to this ship and to these people? Was it a test or was it his redemption? Either way, he knew he didn't want to leave. He was pleased that Mal never asked.

Among the crew, he found he was a different man than he had been at the Abbey. Yes, he was still a Shepherd, but he was more as well. He was confidante and friend; his knowledge--knowledge that a man of God shouldn't have--was never truly questioned, simply accepted. He admired Zoe's stoicism and loyalty, Wash's sense of humor, Kaylee's tender heart, Inara's calmness, Simon's intelligence--but he found he was drawn to the ones he viewed as the most broken: Mal, Jayne, and River.

He wanted to help Mal find peace, hoped they could bury their ghosts together. He wanted to help Jayne find redemption, from whatever it was he was running from. And--most important--he wanted to keep River safe and help her find the girl she had been and bury the...*thing*...the Alliance had tried to make her, just as he had buried the *thing* they had made him.

When bullets were flying or they were running for their lives, *if* he welcomed the old adrenaline rush and the way his senses became hyper-aware, if all his old training flooded to the forefront and took over--it was all for the good of the crew. It was to keep them safe, to help them.

It was never, ever because he wanted it, or enjoyed it, or missed it. He was a man of God now. Violence wasn't his way anymore.

\* \* \* \* \*

It wasn't until he realized what he had done under the influence of the bad protein that it occurred to him he might have been fooling himself. The beast inside him hadn't been buried deeply enough. Underneath his Shepherd *costume*, he was still a killer, still a spy, still the same monster he always had been. The gun pointing at Hodges wasn't as steady as it should have been.

He wondered if Father Leung had seen this weakness in him--if this was the reason he had suggested Book leave the Abbey. Somehow, Leung had known that the man Book had been was not gone, but instead merely biding his time, waiting for the opportune moment to return and wreak havoc in the lives of those he loved.

Book did love the crew, and he couldn't let any harm come to them. He had promised this himself, and he had promised his God.

"They're my family. I'm sorry it's come down to this, Billy, but I will kill you if I have to."

"*You're* going to kill me? You want to come back just as much as I do, and you know it. Put the gun away."

"No." Book stared at him coldly. "I can't let you hurt them."

"Let me? You're the one that *called* me. Hell, *Paulie*, you know what I am. Don't tell me you actually developed a *conscience* at that Abbey!" Hodges tone was mocking. "Don't tell me you actually *think* you're a man of *God*. We both know you aren't."

"Maybe that's true, but I'm working on it," Book replied steadily. "I made a mistake when I contacted you, and now I have to correct it. You can't just kill whomever you want. You can't just--force someone to be something they don't want to be. You know what they did to that little girl, Hodges? They cut open her brain. They made her a weapon. And you want to give her back?"

"Why the hell not? If it means I get back in, why the fuck shouldn't I? She doesn't mean anything to me, and if the Alliance wants her, that's good enough for me. It should be good enough for you."

"It isn't, not anymore. They don't have the right to use people as lab rats, against their will, to kill without impunity. They don't have the right to take little children and make them soulless assassins. They don't have the right!" Book realized he was shouting. Hodges was still laughing at him.

"So kill me then. Kill me, *Shepherd Book*, man of God. I didn't know *Shepherd's* killed people. But you'd better go on and shoot me, because if you don't, I'll kill you. And then I'll kill everyone else on that boat you call home, before I take the girl and her brother back where they belong. So kill me, and become what you were, or come back. It's all the same, in the end."

The gun was heavy in his hand. Hot. Branding him. But it didn't shake when he pointed it at Hodges.

*"Why didn't you kill me?" he had rasped when Shepherd Book checked his bandages. The other man looked at him, smiling gently, lifting a small bottle of water to help him drink.*

*"What I do to the least of my brothers, I do to myself. It's not my place to judge you. It's only my place to help you. Men can change. Only God knows what's in your heart."*

*He smelled apple blossoms, remembered the creases in Father Leung's face. He remembered the voices of his brothers in the Abbey, raised in celebration as they sang their praises to God.*

Hodges was watching him, mocking, as he edged forward slightly. "Thou shalt not kill, *Shepherd*. Thou shalt not kill. You know you can't pull that trigger. If you're really a man of God now, you won't be able to do it."

Book tightened his finger on the trigger, but still didn't pull it. "Shut up."

"No. You're the one that started this, Paulie. You called me; you dragged me into this because you wanted a way out. You're bored with your life. You want back in. You miss the excitement. And you could have had it. We could have had it together, like it used to be. But you realize that's changed now. I'm going to have to kill you, and then I'll kill everyone on that ship of yours."

"No you won't," Book replied. "I'm sorry Billy, but I can't...I can't let you."

When Hodges lunged, Book pulled the trigger. His ears rang as his arm recoiled. "*Father, forgive me, for I have sinned.*"

Hodges lay in the dirt, blood spreading rapidly underneath him. "I knew you hadn't changed," he chuckled weakly with his last, gasping breaths. "You're still the same old Paulie. Welcome back."

\* \* \* \* \*

The ship was where he'd left it. Even from a hundred yards away, he could make out the name displayed prominently on the bow. Serenity. The name mocked him. The first time he'd seen the Firefly, the name had been a sign. Now it was a warning. He would never find Serenity. He would never leave Serenity. He would never have Serenity.

His thoughts circled his brain, making him dizzy. He was moving on instinct now, trying to hold back the adrenaline that had filled him when he had shot Hodges. It had been easier to kill the man than he had thought it would be, and the memory of sliding back into the skin of Paul Carver, Alliance Operative...the jubilation he had felt when he had pulled the trigger and bested his oldest friend and worst enemy...made him sick.

Hodges was back in the Alley where he'd left him. He'd gone over the body first, taking anything important – anything that would indicate who he was. Around Hodges neck, hanging on a thin chain, he'd found a data stick. It was now nestled in his pocket, beside the gun. Both were still warm.

Moving towards Serenity, he realized the docking ramp was up. Both shuttles were in their customary spots, so Mal must have sent someone after it when he'd turned the beacon on. They must have realized Book had abandoned the shuttle – yet they had stuck

around. They'd even left the cargo bay doors open slightly, waiting for his return. He wondered, though, who it was that would return to them – was he still Shepherd Book? Did he still have the right to call himself that, after what he'd done? He had saved the lives of his friends, but in doing so he had broken his vows to God...and to himself. He had brought Hodges down on their heads because, deep down inside, he was still a killer. A new name, a new life...he had been fooling himself if he thought he had changed. Father Leung must have known when he sent him from the Abbey that he still harbored the killer inside him.

Reaching the ship, he pressed his forehead against her cool hull. If he were a good man, he would leave. He wouldn't put them in anymore danger. He had slipped once – what was to say that he wouldn't again? The next time the monster inside him broke free, he might kill them all. God only knew if Hodges had even told him the truth when he said he hadn't told anyone else. It seemed like the truth – it fit his *modus operandi* – Hodges was always a glory hound. He wouldn't have wanted to share his ticket back to the Alliance with anyone, except his old friend Paul. If word had gotten out though, that Paul Carver had contacted him...well, the Alliance would start looking. And he wouldn't be too hard to find. Being on the ship...it put the crew in more danger than they already were.

“We got docking legs to keep the ship up, you know.” Mal's voice, coming from slightly above him, made him jump. “If you get outta the way, I'll lower the docking ramp for you. Glad you're back, Shepherd – wasn't sure what was going on when the beacon started flashing on the shuttle. Jayne was all set to mount a rescue, 'cepting we didn't know where you were.” He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “Can't wait to get off this dung heap.”

Book stepped back, took a deep breath, and smiled calmly at the Captain. “Sorry I left so suddenly. Something came up.”

“Some poor soul in need of counseling, I'm sure.” Mal grimaced at the thought, watching the ramp lower. “Only wish you'd told Zoe where you was headed – we had us some problems with the Lassiter sale. Would have preferred to have cut out once we got them resolved; instead of sitting around waiting for you.”

“Sorry,” Book replied dryly as he entered the cargo bay. “You didn't have to wait.”

Mal laughed at that, clapping him on the shoulder. “Right, and cause a mutiny on the ship? ‘Sides, I don't leave men behind.”

“I didn't think you wanted a Shepherd on your ship.” He turned to Mal, watching him as he closed the bay door behind them. The captain smirked at that.

“You're not a Shepherd. You're the cook. Only one on this here boat can make anything halfway edible with those damn protein bars. That makes you crew.” He hit the intercom button by the doors. “Book's back, Wash. Get us out of here.”

“Hey! Welcome back, Shepherd! We were getting worried!” Wash said over the intercom before switching off to power up the ship.

Book walked further into the cargo bay, Mal beside him. Jayne was at the weights, doing his repetitions. River sat on the catwalk, swinging her legs back and forth over the edge, arms curled around the horizontal rail. She smiled when he looked her way and he felt the pain of it right through his heart. She was just a little girl. He had almost--if anything happened to her because of him...

“You look tired, Shepherd.”

Book blinked, looking back at the captain, who was still standing beside him. “I am tired.”

“Get some rest then. Someone else can cook tonight. Maybe later, over dinner, you can tell us where you rushed off to in such an all-fired hurry, and we’ll tell you about the non-sale of the Lassiter. I’m sure Inara will go on and on. She’s quite incensed.”

Book shook his head at that. “Some things can’t be told. I’m sure your adventures planet side are much more interesting than mine anyway. Besides, if I’m the cook, I’d better earn my keep.”

He was halfway to the galley when he heard River behind him, calling his name. She was following him, her eyes wide and serious, when he turned to her. He wondered if the sight of her would always hurt him, if he would always see Hodges now when he looked into her eyes.

“You keep my secrets, and I’ll keep yours,” she whispered.

He stepped back from her, suddenly nervous. “River?”

“An eye for an eye,” she replied. “That’s the way it works. You saved my eyes. You saved all our eyes.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he muttered, turning away from her.

“You do,” she replied. “But it’s okay to lie if it makes you feel better. You’re still a good man.”

He leaned against the wall, stricken. “Am I?” he whispered. He didn’t object when she leaned into him, hugging him; he found that he could even hug her back. His heart was full of love for her. Hodges was dead. He was dead--but River was safe. He hoped God would forgive him, for judging, but that was what counted in the end: he’d kept the girl safe. He’d corrected his mistake.

“Forgive me,” he begged against the top of her head. He wasn’t sure if he was asking her or God, or if he was asking himself. But when she whispered ‘*I do*,’ he realized her absolution would have to be enough. God was too far away, and he would never forgive himself.